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ABSTRACT

A study examined the relationship between teacher use of power and teacher effectiveness in samples of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. The primary goal was to provide educators with practical information that may assist them in adapting their classroom communication styles to different student audiences. Subjects, 71 traditional undergraduate students and 105 adult learners enrolled in a variety of courses offered through the college of continuing education at a large midwestern university, completed questionnaires designed to measure teacher effectiveness and use of power in the classroom. Findings showed that in this sample of adult learners, teacher effectiveness ratings were significantly and negatively related to teacher use of coercive power and positively related to teacher use of expert power. In the sample of traditional undergraduate students, teacher effectiveness ratings were significantly correlated with teacher use of expert and referent power. (One table of data is included.) (Author/PRA)

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Teacher Use of Power and Teacher Effectiveness: Comparing the Perceptions of Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students

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Teacher Use of Power and Teacher Effectiveness: Comparing the Perceptions of Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between teacher use of power and teacher effectiveness in samples of adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. Our primary goal was to provide educators with practical information that may assist them in adapting their classroom communication styles to different student audiences. Subjects for this study were 71 traditional undergraduate students and 105 adult learners enrolled in a variety of courses offered through the college of continuing education at a large midwestern university. In the sample of adult learners, teacher effectiveness ratings were significantly and negatively related to teacher use of coercive power ($r=-.30$) and positively related to teacher use of expert power ($r=.22$). In the sample of traditional undergraduate students, teacher effectiveness ratings were significantly correlated with teacher use of expert ($r=.24$) and referent power ($r=.24$). Implications for instructors working with adult learners and traditional undergraduate students are discussed.

Teacher Use of Power and Teacher Effectiveness: Comparing the Perceptions of Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students

Rationale

A recent examination of the relationship between teacher communication style and teacher effectiveness revealed that teacher communication style was a more meaningful contributor to teacher effectiveness for adult learners than for traditional undergraduates (Comadena, Semlak, & Escott, 1990). Specifically, teacher communication style accounted for approximately 67% of the variation in teacher effectiveness ratings for the adult learners, while teacher communication style accounted for only 43% of the variation in teacher effectiveness for the traditional undergraduates. The Comadena et al. (1990) study demonstrated that, in order to be effective teachers, instructors may need to modify their communication styles for different student populations. A communication style that works with one student audience may not work for another. More specifically, instructors working with adult learners need to be particularly sensitive to the way they communicate in their classrooms. For adult learners, teacher effectiveness is, in large part, a function of how the teacher communicates in the classroom.[1]

Another important component of an instructor's communication style, a component not examined in the Comadena et al. (1989) study, is the teacher's style of influencing students in the classroom. To enhance learning,

teachers must seek to influence students to perform various tasks and activities. However, the way a teacher seeks to influence students may have significant implications for the quality of relationships between students and teacher. Certain influence strategies, if used consistently in a course, may cause students to develop a negative attitude toward the instructor and the course.

An individual's ability to influence others to do things has been termed social power (French & Raven, 1968; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). French and Raven (1968), in a now classic article, have identified five power bases: coercive, referent, legitimate, expert, and reward power. In the classroom, these bases of power may be defined as follows (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983).

Coercive power is based upon students' perceptions that the teacher can punish them if they do not perform the behaviors requested by the teacher (e.g., "submit your work on time or receive an F"). Referent power is based on the degree to which a student identifies with a teacher. If a student likes a teacher, the more referent power the teacher possesses. Legitimate power is based upon the perception that teachers have the right to request certain types of behaviors from students. Expert power is based upon students' perceptions that teacher is knowledgeable or competent in a given area. Finally, reward power refers to influence that stems from students' perception that teacher can and will reward certain behaviors performed by students

(e.g., "complete this exercise and receive extra credit in the course").

Research on power in the classroom indicates that teacher use of power can influence students' cognitive and affective learning. Richmond and McCroskey (1984), for example, in a study of students in grades 7 through college, found that teacher use of coercive and, to some extent, legitimate power, was negatively related to both cognitive and affective learning. The present study seeks to determine the extent to which the results of the Richmond and McCroskey (1984) generalize to the adult learner classroom. Which bases of power should or should not be used with adult learners? Which bases of power do adult learners associate with effective teachers? Answers to these questions will help instructors adjust their communication styles to produce more effective learning atmospheres in their classrooms.

The purpose of this exploratory study, then, was to determine if different bases of power are associated with teacher effectiveness in adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. Our primary goal was to provide educators with practical information that may assist them in adapting their classroom communication styles to different student audiences. The following research question was

addressed:

> Do adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate different bases of power with teacher effectiveness?

Methods

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 71 traditional undergraduate students and 105 adult learners enrolled in a variety of courses offered through the college of continuing education at a large midwestern university. There were 23 males and 82 females in the sample of adult learners. There were 17 males and 54 females in the sample of traditional undergraduates. The average age of the adult learners was 37.00 years, while the average age of the traditional undergraduates was 22.93 years. The two groups were significantly different in age ($t=12.33$, $df=174$, $p=.000$).

Measurement

Teacher Use of Power. The procedures used to measure teacher use of power were adapted from McCroskey and Richmond (1983). A questionnaire was created on which descriptions of each of the five bases of social power (French & Raven, 1968) were provided. For example, to measure teacher's use of referent power, subjects were given the following description:

> Referent power stems from the student's identification with an instructor. If the student likes an instructor and wants to please the instructor because of his or her liking for the instructor, the instructor is said

to possess referent power. The stronger the student's attraction to a teacher, the stronger the teacher's referent power.

After reading this passage, subjects were asked to report the extent to which his or her instructor uses referent power in the classroom. Subjects' perceptions were recorded on 5 semantic differential scales. For example, To measure referent power, subjects read the following statement and completed the scales below it:

"My instructor uses referent power in the classroom."

Agree ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Disagree

False ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ True

Incorrect ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Correct

Wrong ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ Right

Yes ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ No

To measure legitimate, reward, coercive, and expert power, subjects were given descriptions of each type of power (similar to the one above), and asked to report the extent to which his or her instructor uses that type of power on the five semantic differential scales described above. The internal reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) for the five power measures were as follows: coercive (.97), reward (.98), legitimate (.97), referent (.98), and expert (.98).

Teacher Effectiveness. Teacher effectiveness was measured with 5 items. Subjects were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following

items on a 5-step Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree):

1. My instructor motivates me to do my best work.
2. My instructor explains difficult material clearly.
3. Course assignments are interesting and stimulating.
4. Overall, this course is among the best I have ever taken.
5. Overall, this instructor is among the best I have ever known.

The 5-item teacher effectiveness scale had an internal reliability estimate (Cronbach's alpha) of .87.

Procedures

Instructors were provided with questionnaires designed to measure their effectiveness and their use of power in the classroom. Subjects completed the questionnaire out-of-class and returned their questionnaires to the researcher with a postage-paid envelope provided them.

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research question guiding this investigation, subjects' ratings of teacher use of the five bases of power and teacher effectiveness were correlated. Separate correlations were calculated for the two samples. Significance was set at .05.

Results

Results of the correlational analysis are reported in Table 1. In the sample of adult learners, teacher effectiveness ratings were significantly correlated with two

of the five power ratings. Teacher effectiveness was inversely related to the use of coercive power (r=-.30, p=.001), and positively related the use of expert power (r=.22, p=.013). In the sample of traditional undergraduate students, teacher effectiveness ratings were correlated with the use of expert (r=.24, p=.022) and referent power (r=.24, p=.021).

Discussion

The research question guiding this investigation asked whether the relationship between teacher effectiveness and teacher use of power in the classroom differed for adult learners and traditional undergraduate students. Results of the correlational analysis revealed that, in the two groups observed, slightly different bases of power were related to teacher effectiveness. In the sample of adult learners, ratings of teacher effectiveness were negatively correlated to the use of coercive power, and positively related to the use of expert power. The finding regarding coercive power is consistent with prior research in this area (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Using threats (e.g., "get this paper to me by Friday or fail the course") to influence the adult learner is likely to backfire and create a negative classroom atmosphere. Instead, instructors should seek to influence students by creating an impression in students that they are experts on course content. Thus, references to one's educational background, one's research interests, and one's training record (i.e., how long one has taught,

groups one has taught, where one has taught) are some strategies that may create the image of an expert.

Traditional undergraduate students also equate teacher effectiveness with the use of expert power. However, these students also associate the use of referent power with teacher effectiveness. As noted in the Rationale section of this paper, referent power stems from an attraction one has for another. If I'm attracted to you, I can be easily influenced by you because I desire to maintain my relationship with you. Thus, a concern for individual interpersonal relationships creates a power base for teachers of traditional undergraduate students. It is interesting to note that traditional undergraduate students did not associate the use of coercive power (threats) with teacher effectiveness.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that effective teachers must adapt their communication styles when teaching different types of students. What works with traditional undergraduates may not work with adult learners. Good teachers are good communicators. Good communicators are flexible, capable of adapting their communications to different audiences.

Footnotes

1. Malcolm Knowles' (1978) definition of adult is used in this report. An adult is one who performs adult roles (i.e., worker, spouse, parent, responsible citizen) and whose self-concept is that of an adult.

Table 1

Correlations Between Teacher Effectiveness & Teacher Use of Power Bases

	Teacher Effectiveness	
	ADULTS LEARNERS	TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATES
Power		
Expert Power	.22 (p=.013)	.24 (p=.022)
Referent Power	.09 (p=.173)	.24 (p=.021)
Legitimate Power	-.09 (p=.172)	.07 (p=.293)
Coercive Power	-.30 (p=.001)	-.08 (p=.247)
Reward Power	-.14 (p=.068)	.07 (p=.287)

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